A Role for Rewards in Character Education

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Abstract

Berkowitz (2022) argues that extrinsic motivators (e.g., rewards) have no place in character education because they often undermine intrinsic motivation. While it is true that rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017), this argument assumes that character education is only for those who are *already* intrinsically motivated. On the contrary, character education is needed most by those who are *not* motivated to be virtuous. In this essay, I argue that for such people, rewards could *in theory* play a positive role in facilitating the initial development of intrinsic motivation. A reward could be used to extrinsically motivate engagement in a virtuous activity (e.g., helping others), wherein its inherent satisfactions may be felt, and intrinsic motivation may follow. I explain this speculative effect in terms of an internal shift in *perceived locus of causality* (PLOC) and outline how it might be tested empirically via an expansion of Warneken and Tomasello's (2008) study.

Keywords: character education, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, perceived locus of causality (PLOC), rewards

A Role for Rewards in Character Education

Can extrinsic motivators play a role in character education? This is a question of recent debate. Watts, Fullard and Peterson (henceforth "WFP") (2021, 2022) claim that rewards can be useful in encouraging children to internalise virtues. Berkowitz (2022) disagrees, arguing that extrinsic motivators are at best ineffective, but often undermine the internalisation of virtues and distract from more effective strategies for developing intrinsic motivation.

This is a problem not only for character education, but any form of moral education that invokes the notion of *intrinsic* value. Indeed, how can value from within be inculcated from without? This is a more general formulation of Peters' (1981) famous "paradox of moral education" regarding the transition from heteronomous strategies of moral internalisation (in the "courtyard" of moral development) to autonomous *phronesis*-guided moral motivations (the ultimate "palace") (p. 52). Whereas Peters' paradox concerns the internalisation of just one virtue (albeit the meta-virtue of *phronesis*), the question here concerns the internalisation of *any* virtue.

There are also practical implications. If character education cannot accommodate the use of extrinsic motivators, this may alienate schools whose behaviour policies include rewards and sanctions, which happens to be the majority of schools. To avoid this, WFP (2021; 2022, p. 598) adopt a strategy of "adaption rather than transformation". For Berkowitz (2022), however, this strategy is too accommodating.

In this essay, I will argue that extrinsic motivators (viz. tangible rewards) could *in theory* play a role in character education by facilitating the initial development of intrinsic motivation. I will detail the psychological mechanism by which this speculative effect might occur and outline an experiment by which it might be tested empirically. It is worth stressing at the outset that despite being many times suggested – most recently by WFP (2021, 2022) – there remains no body of evidence to support the proposition that external rewards can have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation. The proposed research would address this lacuna. I will begin by explicating the relationship between character education and intrinsic motivation.

Character Education and Intrinsic Motivation

Character education aims to cultivate virtues that have *intrinsic* (i.e., non-instrumental) value, specifically, moral virtues (e.g., courage, justice, honesty, etc.) (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 19). Virtues have components: perception, emotion, desire, motivation, behaviour, and style (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 14). The intrinsic value of moral virtues is no doubt spread among these components, each component making its own contribution to the whole. But the motivation component *must* be included. There is no intrinsic value without intrinsic motivation. In other words, intrinsic motivation is *necessary* for intrinsic value, and thus for character education.

Intrinsic motivation refers to the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions (e.g., supervening feelings of effectance or enjoyment), whereas *extrinsic* motivation refers to the doing of an activity for some separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2017, p. 14). Extrinsically motivated behaviours are thus instrumental (i.e., a means to an end), whereas intrinsically motivated behaviours are non-instrumental (i.e., ends in themselves). Intrinsic motivation is important in this context because it is essential to virtue that people engage in virtuous activity *because* it is virtuous (Curren, 2014). Were it for some separable consequence (e.g., a reward), the activity would not be virtuous. That is not to say that an individual cannot be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, even for one and the same activity. Although when so combined, there is often a detrimental effect on intrinsic motivation (see below). Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is, by definition, *autonomous* or *self-governed* (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 14), and a central aim of character education is the development of *autonomous* virtue (Jubilee Centre, 2022).

Intrinsically motivated behaviours are thus experienced as emanating from the self. In attributional terms, they have an *internal perceived locus of causality* (I-PLOC), whereas extrinsically motivated behaviours have an *external perceived locus of causality* (E-PLOC) (de Charms 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2017, pp. 65–67). When WFP (2021, 2022) and Berkowitz (2022) discuss the "internalisation of virtues," they may be interpreted in these terms: A virtue is internalised when the PLOC for its associated behaviour shifts from external to internal.

In summary, there is a close relationship between character education, intrinsic value, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and an internal PLOC. Each concept is at least necessary for the former. Thus, discussion of whether some strategy is conducive to character education often reduces to discussion of its effects on intrinsic motivation.

Before proceeding, however, it is worth considering two objections to the claim that intrinsic motivation is necessary for character education. First, experience tells us that not all virtuous behaviours produce enjoyment; think of cleaning your room, for example, or simply showing up on time. But if some virtuous behaviours do not produce enjoyment, then it seems that intrinsic motivation is not necessary for virtue, after all. An Aristotelian response to this objection would run as follows (Kristjánsson, personal communication, May 18, 2023). If we understand (correctly) that flourishing is the ultimate goal of life, and that virtues are constitutive of, rather than just conducive to, flourishing, then we will be intrinsically motivated to pursue them. We are intrinsically motivated to clean our rooms, for example, not because it produces enjoyment, but because we understand that it is constitutive of flourishing. So, despite the fact that not all virtuous behaviours produce enjoyment, this does not (according to the Aristotelian) refute the claim that intrinsic motivation is necessary for virtue.

Second, extrinsic motivation can vary in its relative autonomy, from external regulation (least autonomous) to integrated regulation (most autonomous) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Could highly integrated extrinsic motivation not suffice for the purposes of character education? While highly integrated extrinsic motivation may *suffice* for the purposes of character education, it is not the ideal outcome. The ideal outcome is *intrinsically* motivated virtue. As Ryan et al. (2013) point out, “the excellent pursuit of *intrinsic* goods … will be most compatible with thriving” (p. 64; my emphasis). This article therefore concerns the speculative transition from a potentially sufficient outcome (extrinsic motivation) to an ideal outcome (intrinsic motivation).

Intrinsic Motivation and Rewards

The debate between WFP (2021, 2022) and Berkowitz (2022) boils down to the following question: Can rewards have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation? WFP (2021, 2022) think they can; Berkowitz (2022) disagrees.

The answer depends initially on how broadly we conceive the notion of rewards. If we include *verbal* rewards, also known as *praise* or *positive feedback*, then rewards can indeed have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 137). It is clear, however, that Berkowitz (2022) and WFP (2021, 2022) are not arguing over verbal rewards, but rather *tangible* rewards (e.g., merits, certificates, points, stickers, candy, trinkets, etc.).

Tangible rewards do indeed have a negative effect on intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, pp. 137–140). This effect is wholly accounted for by *expected* rewards, especially engagement-, completion- and performance-contingent rewards. *Unexpected* rewards, on the other hand, have no significant effect on intrinsic motivation. But this alone will not vindicate WFP (2021, 2022). It is not enough that some rewards have *no* effect on intrinsic motivation. What WFP need is a reward that has a *positive* effect on intrinsic motivation.

To illustrate the risk of rewards, consider an experiment by Warneken and Tomasello (2008) that investigated the influence of rewards on very young children's helping behaviour. Children entered a room and were presented with an opportunity to help. An experimenter would drop an object onto the floor and unsuccessfully reach for it. The child could help by picking up the object and handing it back to the experimenter. During the treatment phase, children who helped received either a tangible reward, a verbal reward, or no reward at all. Each child underwent twelve trials. Once a child had helped in five trials, they proceeded to the test phase, where they underwent nine more trials. This time, however, they received no rewards. Warneken and Tomasello (2008) found that children who had previously received a verbal reward or no reward continued to help on a high level, whereas children who had previously received a tangible reward helped less often. They concluded that tangible rewards can undermine children's intrinsic motivation to help others.

This effect may be interpreted in terms of a *shift* in perceived locus of causation (PLOC) (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 127). Rewarding an activity that is intrinsically motivated can prompt a shift in PLOC from internal to external. Whereas initially children had been helping because they found it inherently satisfying, those who received a reward came to view the activity as a means to an end. The reward thus undermined their autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Though he makes no explicit reference to any particular studies, we may assume that it is this well-documented negative effect that Berkowitz (2022) has in mind when arguing against the use of rewards in character education.

In Warneken and Tomasello's (2008) study, children proceeded to the test phase once they had helped in five trials. If a child failed to meet this criterion, the session was terminated. This was the case for thirteen children–36% of the sample. What if these children had instead been offered a reward contingent on helping? What effect might this have had on their motivation? It is with these children that WFP (2021, 2022) may yet find vindication.

When Intrinsic Motivation is Absent

Rewards can certainly undermine intrinsic motivation. But this effect occurs only in those who are *already* intrinsically motivated. Indeed, something must be present before it can be undermined. For those who are *not* intrinsically motivated, perhaps rewards could have a positive effect if wisely applied. This has been acknowledged, usually by way of caveat, since the earliest studies on the "overjustification" effect (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973, p. 136; Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 125). Yet it is often overlooked or underappreciated by interpreters (e.g., Berkowitz, 2022). Within character education, WFP (2021) entertain the possibility that rewards may have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation (p. 79). But, alas, they provide no explanation as to how the effect might occur. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Berkowitz (2022) is unconvinced. I will now offer such an explanation.

Returning to Warneken and Tomasello's (2008) study, thirteen children failed to help in five trials and, by this criterion, were deemed *not* intrinsically motivated to help. Suppose that instead of terminating the session, these children had been offered a helping-contingent reward. Some of

them may have then met the specified criterion and been deemed *extrinsically* motivated to help. What effect would the experience of helping in five trials have had on their motivation? Recall that for those who are intrinsically motivated, rewards can prompt an external shift in PLOC. But for those who are extrinsically motivated, the PLOC is already external. Might the sustained experience of helping therefore prompt an *internal* shift in PLOC? If the PLOC can move in one direction, why not the other?

Suppose that Michael is one such child, that is, he is extrinsically motivated to help via the promise of a reward. With his eyes on the prize, Michael begins to help. After a while, however, he starts to lose focus on the reward. He becomes distracted by how he is feeling in the moment–it is a *good* feeling. The inherent satisfaction of helping others thus prompts an internal shift in PLOC–Michael is becoming *intrinsically* motivated.

The story of Michael is not an unreasonable one. In his *Autobiography* (1873), John Stuart Mill writes: “Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness … . Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way” (p. 119). Paraphrasing Mill, we might say that by aiming at an extrinsic reward, Michael found intrinsic motivation along the way. And it is worth noting that there is indeed a strong connection between intrinsic motivation and happiness (Ryan, Curren & Deci, 2013).

Objections

In summary, for those who are *not* intrinsically motivated to engage in an inherently satisfying activity (e.g., helping others), a reward may be used to *extrinsically* motivate them to engage in the activity. Once engaged, the inherent satisfaction of the activity could prompt an internal shift in PLOC, thus facilitating the development of intrinsic motivation. I present this claim as an empirically testable hypothesis. In the next section, I will suggest how such a test might proceed. But first, I will consider some preliminary objections.

First, if the activity in question is inherently satisfying, how could someone *not* be intrinsically motivated to engage in it? After all, intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an

activity for its inherent satisfactions. This is true. But someone may never have engaged in the activity, or not engaged in it for long enough to feel its inherent satisfactions, in which case they could not possibly be motivated by these satisfactions. Indeed, motivation *causes* action, and a cause must precede its effect. A reward may therefore be used to extrinsically motivate engagement in the activity, wherein its inherent satisfactions may be felt, and intrinsic motivation may follow.

There is a possible counterexample to my argument, here. According to Warneken and Tomasello (2008), even the earliest helping behaviours of young children are intrinsically motivated. But if these behaviours are indeed the *earliest*–that is, they are preceded by no experience of helping whatsoever–then this would imply one of two things: either that children may have innate knowledge of the inherent satisfaction of helping, or that an effect may precede its cause. If these implications are to be avoided, then the earliest helping behaviours may be better characterised not as intrinsically motivated, but rather as *spontaneous* (i.e., without intent).

Second, it is not the reward that has a positive effect on intrinsic motivation, but rather the inherent satisfaction of the activity. This is true, and necessarily so. For it is only the inherent satisfaction of the activity that could prompt an internal shift in PLOC. Indeed, the terms *internal*, *inherent*, and *intrinsic* have one and the same referent, namely, the *self* (qua engaged in the activity). The best we can hope to achieve with extrinsic motivators–that is, motivators that are *external* to the self–is to draw attention to the activity by encouraging engagement with it. The effect of the reward is indirect, granted, but it is still positive. And once engaged in the activity, this effect may be amplified by simply asking participants how they feel.

Third, why risk using rewards at all? Why not instead use strategies that are more effective in developing intrinsic motivation, for example, building positive relationships, role modelling, and having high expectations (Berkowitz, 2022)?[1] Observe, first, that this objection shifts the goalposts.

[1] It is perhaps curious that these strategies should enhance intrinsic motivation when they too are external to the target activity. But observe that role-modelling only works when the target activity is being modelled, and high expectations only work when students are expected to engage in the target activity. In both cases, attention is being drawn back to the activity itself. And these strategies are of course enhanced by

The original question was whether rewards can have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation. Whether there are more effective strategies is a separate issue. Moreover, while these strategies may be more effective in general, they may not work in every case. For example, since they are all based on relationships, they may not work for those who have a general distrust of others (e.g., victims of abuse). In such cases, tangible rewards may be the best or even the only starting point.

That said, rewards must still be used with great care. The reward should be *small*, just big enough to motivate sufficient engagement in the target activity. Indeed, small rewards are less likely to undermine intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 145). And once sufficient engagement is achieved, the reward should be promptly removed. For once the inherent satisfaction of the activity has prompted an internal shift in PLOC, the reward would only serve as a distraction. The implementation of such a strategy would therefore require great sensitivity and ingenuity on the part of the practitioner.

And there are other dangers. One might worry that trying to develop intrinsic motivation via external rewards could prompt an external shift in PLOC for not only the target behaviour, but also other related behaviours – a "spillover" effect. Observe, however, that in Michael's scenario above (and the experiment outlined below), the target behaviour (viz. helping) starts off extrinsically motivated via rewards; that is, the PLOC is *already* external. The only direction in which it can move is *inwards*. This is precisely what my hypothesis predicts will happen after feeling the inherent satisfaction of helping. If this positive effect spills over into related behaviours, this would be a bonus! But there is more serious concern – a "contagion" effect (Gubler et al., 2016). Even if the inherent satisfaction of helping prompts an internal shift in PLOC, as hypothesised, these positive feelings would occur *within* the individual; they could not be felt by an outside observer. All an observer would see is helping followed by a reward. This could indeed prompt in them an *external* shift in PLOC. There is an obvious solution: *no observers*. Admittedly, this would be difficult to

positive relationships. There may even be some relationships–arguably, character friendships (Kristjánsson, 2022, p. 193)–where the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic becomes dissolved.

implement is most educational settings. So, should the proposed strategy prove efficacious on the individual level, it may best be reserved for on-to-one interventions.

Finally, what guarantee is there that once someone is engaged in the target activity, they will feel its inherent satisfactions? None. There is no guarantee. For example, some unfortunate children may be so constituted as to never feel the inherent satisfaction of helping others. These children could never become *intrinsically* motivated to engage in helping via extrinsic rewards. But just because a strategy might not work in all cases is no reason to think that it would not work in some or even most cases. So, for whom exactly might rewards facilitate the initial development of intrinsic motivation? Such questions cannot be answered by reason alone.

Prelude to Empirical Research

In response to Berkowitz's (2022) criticism, WFP (2022) state that more empirical research is needed to understand the extent to which extrinsic motivators can support intrinsic motivation. A point of clarification is in order. Much research has already examined the effect of external factors (e.g., rewards) on extrinsic motivation, specifically, the degree to which it is *integrated* and *internalised* (Ryan & Deci, 2017). That is not the focus here. No matter how integrated an extrinsic motivator may be, it remains an *extrinsic* motivator (Ryan & Deci, 2017, pp. 197-198). The focus here is whether external rewards might be used to kickstart a wholly different kind of motivation – *intrinsic* motivation. As yet, however, there is no body of evidence to support this speculative proposition. I will now suggest how such research might proceed via an expansion of Warneken and Tomasello's (2008) study.

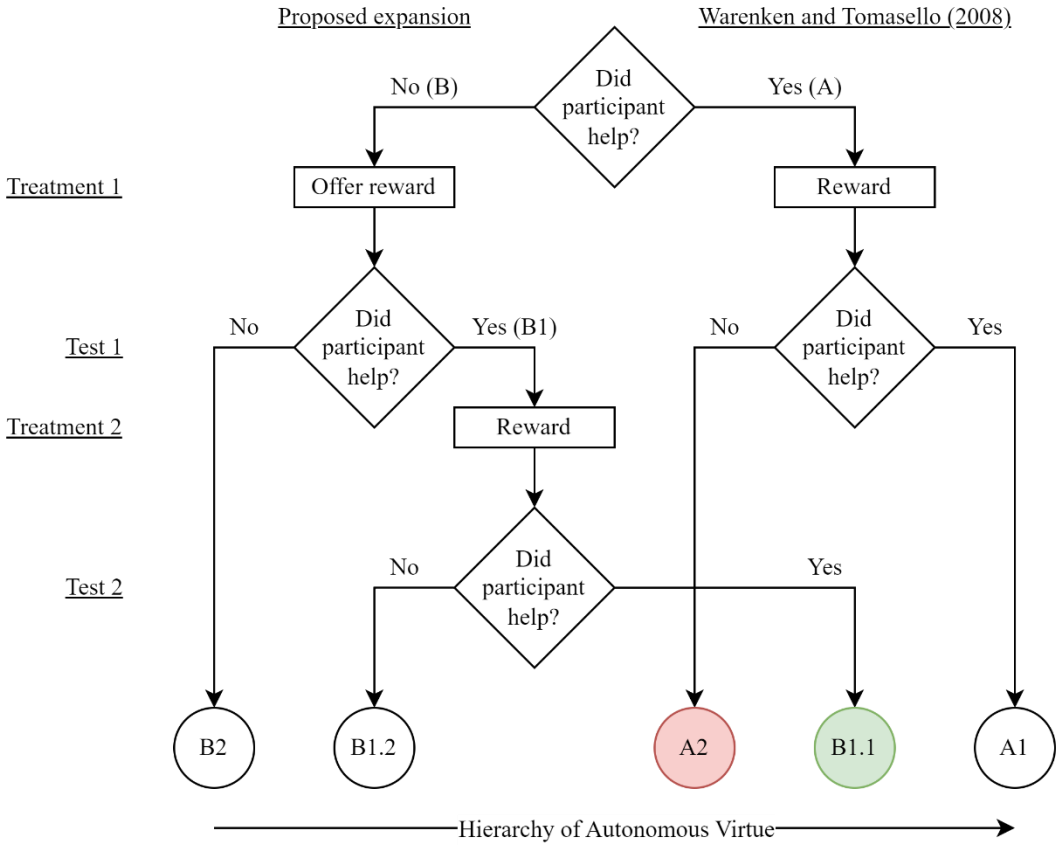
Instead of terminating the session, children who initially fail to meet the criterion of helping in five trials could be offered a helping-contingent reward. This would comprise a parallel treatment phase. Children who then meet the specified criterion would be deemed *extrinsically* motivated to help and proceed to a parallel test phase, where they would undergo more trials but without rewards. If these children were found to help more often than previously, this would provide evidence for an effect in which rewards facilitate the initial development of intrinsic motivation.

It might be objected that such a shift in motivation would be difficult to discern in very young children with limited language abilities. This would be a problem only if I proposed measuring intrinsic motivation via self-reports, such as the *Intrinsic Motivation Inventory* (Ryan et al., 1983). But I do not. Rather, following Warnken and Tomasello (2008), and indeed most researchers, I propose using Deci's (1971) *free-choice paradigm*, where intrinsic motivation is operationalised through observing the amount of time participants freely spend engaged in an activity (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 126).

Through the proposed expansion of Warneken and Tomasello's (2008) study, participants could take one of five paths, as detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Flowchart of the Proposed Expansion of Warneken and Tomasello's (2008) Study



Note. "Did participant help?" should be interpreted as "Did the participant meet the specified criterion for helping (e.g., helping in five trials)?"

The "A-side" of Figure 1 is Warneken and Tomasello's (2008) original study. A-children start off intrinsically motivated to help. After receiving a reward, A1-children remain intrinsically motivated, whereas A2-children lose intrinsic motivation. It is these children that Warneken and Tomasello (2008) cite as evidence for the claim that rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation.

The "B-side" is the proposed expansion. B-children are *not* initially motivated to help. After being offered a reward, B2-children remain unmotivated, whereas B1-children become *extrinsically* motivated to help. After receiving the reward, B1.2-children revert to being unmotivated, whereas B1.1-children, via a detour through extrinsic motivation, have started to become *intrinsically* motivated. It is these children that could be cited as evidence for the claim that rewards can facilitate the initial development of intrinsic motivation.

The expanded study thus generates a hierarchy of autonomous virtue. B2-children would be at the bottom because, according to the specified criterion, they were never motivated to help. B1.2-children would be next because they, for a time, were at least extrinsically motivated. B1.1-children would leapfrog A2-children, because B1.1-motivation has shifted from extrinsic to intrinsic, whereas A2-motivation has shifted from intrinsic to extrinsic.[2] A1-children would sit at the top of the hierarchy because, despite the lure of a reward, their motivation to help was steadfastly intrinsic.

It is also worth observing that if Figure 1 is rotated a quarter turn anticlockwise, it bears a striking resemblance to the Jubilee Centre's (2022) neo-Aristotelian model of moral development. The A-side and B-side of Figure 1 correspond to the upper trajectory ("Plan A") and lower trajectory ("Plan B") of the model, that is, to those who are initially intrinsically motivated to be virtuous but may slip off-track, and those who are *not* initially motivated to be virtuous but may become intrinsically motivated via extrinsic motivation (respectively). This correspondence – to a theoretical model that dates back to Aristotle and is still considered to have credibility in character educational circles – lends yet further theoretical support to the proposition that rewards can facilitate the development of intrinsic motivation.

Conclusion

Arguing that extrinsic motivators have no use within character education because they often undermine intrinsic motivation commits Berkowitz (2022) to the view that character education is only for those who are already intrinsically motivated. This view runs the danger of appearing elitist, similar to Tough's (2013) view that moral education is only for the psychologically privileged (pp. 78–81). It also risks undermining character education as a practical program of moral development. For those who are already intrinsically motivated to be virtuous have less need for character education. It is needed most by those who are *not* motivated to be virtuous–the Plan B children. And it is with

[2] Given the strong connection between intrinsic motivation of wellbeing (Ryan et al., 2013), we may perhaps question the ethics of studies that result in participants becoming less intrinsically motivated (e.g. Warneken & Tomasello, 2008; and my proposed expansion).

these children that rewards could *in theory* play a positive role by facilitating the initial development of intrinsic motivation.

This speculative proposition could be tested empirically via an expansion of Warneken and Tomasello's (2008) study, as outlined above. If supported, however, it would justify only a *minimal* role for rewards in character education, specifically, for those who are not already intrinsically motivated and for whom more powerful strategies have been found inadequate, and only until sufficient engagement in the target activity is achieved. Even then, the strategy could only work for those who are capable of feeling the inherent satisfaction of the target activity. Moreover, the strategy would still run the risk of having a negative effect on any onlookers, and so may best be reserved for one-to-one interventions. This minimal role may not be enough to justify WFP's (2021; 2022, p. 598) "adaptive" approach across the board. The use of rewards, as practiced in many schools, may still be counterproductive to the aims of character education.

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